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Local News

Local pianist sees passion in Mozart work

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By Lee B. Roberts
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If the name Mozart brings thoughts of lighthearted music to mind, it is time to think again, says local pianist Fumi Nishikiori-Nakayama.

True, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's compositions aren't particularly heavy, said the pianist. But they are far from easy listening.

Consider his "Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor" for example. This piece, which Nishikiori-Nakayama will perform in concert Saturday night with the Racine Symphony Orchestra, is a very dramatic work written in a dark color key. When he wrote this mature piece, Mozart was recovering from the loss of his mother and, at the same time, struggling to provide a decent life for his wife and himself as an independent musician, she explained.

"It is a very passionate piece," the pianist said. "There are many dissonant sounds, but you will also find many warm, beautiful notes within the melody."

Mozart's ability to express such drama, alongside elegance and pure harmony, is one of the things that draws Nishikiori-Nakayama to his music.

"I am very excited to be able to perform this piece," she said.

Her passion for classical music in general is something Nishikiori-Nakayama enjoys sharing with people, both in the concert hall and in the classroom. As a teacher at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music in Milwaukee, her mission is to educate her students about how much fun classical music can be.

"There are so many misconceptions about classical music," she said. "People often think of it as kids having to practice and practice to achieve all the notes correctly in order to win a competition.

But there is so much more to it than that."

Nishikiori-Nakayama's own enlightenment to the joys of classical music came while earning her bachelor's and master's degrees (in piano and harpsichord) from Chicago's Roosevelt University and the University of Indiana in Bloomington. Having immigrated to the U.S. from Tokyo at age 17 with her music teacher parents, the pianist said she drew much inspiration from her professors at both colleges — especially Ludmila Lazar at Roosevelt.

"She was so great," she said. "She really inspired me to study and made me explore different things within the music."

Nishikiori-Nakayama also credits the freedom she had to experience a wide range of courses — everything from composition and conducting to voice and theater — with deepening her love of music. Her work as an opera coach for the Indiana University Opera Theater for six years helped her to interpret things differently on the keyboard, she said.

"I learned a lot from the singers I worked with," she said.

Since moving to Racine about 11 years ago, Nishikiori-Nakayama has become a regular piano soloist at First Presbyterian Church. The mother of two also freelances as a piano-harpsichord soloist and accompanist in the Milwaukee/Chicago area, and often participates in recording of newly composed works by Midwestern composers. In 2007, she received the Distinguished Musician Award at the Ibla Grand Prize competition in Ragusa, Italy.

Her performance of "Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor" will be one of three pieces in the RSO's all-Mozart program on Saturday night. Also scheduled for the symphony's season opener, which will be conducted by RSO music director Andrew Massey, are Mozart's overture to "Cosi fan tutte" and "Symphony No. 38 ("Prague"). For information about the rest of the orchestra's 2008/2009 season, see today's Out & About section.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: All Mozart Concert by the Racine Symphony Orchestra, with guest artist Fumi Nishikiori-Nakayama

WHEN: 7 p.m. Saturday (Nov. 1)

WHERE: First Presbyterian Church, 716 College Ave.

COST: Advance purchase tickets are $23 adults, $20 seniors and $5 students (children under 8 get in free) and must be reserved by Friday. Tickets at the door are $25, $22 and $8. Family passes (good for up to five family members) are $55.

INFO: Tickets can be purchased online at http://www.racinesymphony.org

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